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ABSTRACT

White, Black, and Hispanic students were studied during their transition from school or work to a community college. Students (N=71) at the College of Lake County (CLC) in Illinois attended focus groups formed according to race or ethnic group (White, Black, or Hispanic) in the spring and fall semesters to discuss their goals, experience, and feelings about the college environment. Findings from the fall focus groups indicated that all groups of students saw a direct connection between higher education and desirable employment. Most students in all three groups planned to get a degree or certificate at CLC. White students were most likely to plan on transferring to another school and least likely to plan on a CLC degree whereas Black students were most likely to plan on a CLC degree or certificate and least likely to plan on transferring. Findings from the spring focus group meetings indicated that many students found college harder than expected and all confirmed the importance of support from parents, family, friends, and faculty. Difficulties reported by many students included attending college part-time, not socializing with other students, and, for younger students, relating to older students in class. All expressed a comfortable feeling with campus diversity although their personal experiences in relationship to their race/ethnicity differed by group. Orientation and extracurricular activities were seen as helpful for students adjusting to college. (Contains 19 references.) (CK)

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A Study of Student Transition to College

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 5-8, 1996. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

Abstract

To examine student transition from school or work to college, first-time freshmen at a community college were invited to attend focus groups in the fall semester, 1994, and in the spring semester, 1995. Formed by race/ethnicity, the focus groups discussed students' goals and expectations, their transition to college, and their comfort with the college environment. Results indicated that the transition process differed for white, black, and Hispanic students. The implications of this study will help the college design and develop strategies to facilitate student transition to college, implement intervention techniques to improve retention, and create professional growth opportunities so that faculty and staff understand more fully the challenges students face.

A Study of Student Transition to College

This research project evolved from a presentation at the College of Lake County (CLC) in January, 1993, in which Dr. Claude Steele, a professor of social psychology at Stanford University outlined several themes that have emerged from his research. He believes that there is a "deepening crisis in the education of black Americans" (Steele, 1992, p. 68). He explains, "From elementary school to graduate school, something depresses black achievement at every level of preparation, even the highest." (Steele, 1992, p. 70). He noted in his speech that the grades black students earn the first semester of college quickly fall behind those of white students with similar standardized test scores. In sum, "the same achievement level requires better preparation for blacks than for whites" (Steele, 1992, p. 70).

Data from CLC's longitudinal student database support Steele's theories. The GPAs of black students are consistently below those of white and Hispanic students, and black students tend to have a lower ratio of credit hours earned compared to those attempted. Black students fall behind white students as early as their first semester of enrollment. In addition, a larger percentage of black students than represented in the student body are placed into developmental education upon initial enrollment at CLC. This is also true of Hispanic students.

Steele's presentation led to the formation of the CLC Learning as a Challenge Committee, so named because "challenging students works better than dumbing down their education" (Steele in an interview with Leslie, 1995). The charge of the committee was to determine ways that Steele's theories could be implemented at the college. The original discussion divided into three parts: curriculum development, research, and student development. A Research Subcommittee composed of faculty and staff was formed to develop and implement a research study focusing on CLC minority students, specifically blacks and Hispanics.

During discussions, CLC faculty reported a lessening of academic preparedness among students. They noted that not only were students academically unprepared, but they also came to class unprepared to participate fully. In other words, the students did not understand their

responsibilities as students nor did they know what to expect from college. Faculty noted this lack of preparation especially among first-time freshmen and believed that it could be more extensive among black and Hispanic students. This anecdotal evidence, Steele's presentation, and quantitative data on student performance by race/ethnicity led to discussions about students' transition to college. Questions were raised about students' background and experience, their goals and expectations, the obstacles they face, the influences on their lives as they attend college, and their fit with CLC. These questions could not be answered from the available data. Discussion also focused on whether student transition to college differed by race/ethnicity.

Because so much research suggests that the first year of enrollment is critical to student success, this research project focused on first-time freshmen and their transition from school or work to college. The purpose of this research project was to go beyond the data from the longitudinal student database to investigate student transition to college. While CLC's longitudinal student database provided a great deal of information on students' goals, progress, and outcomes, the information was limited to quantitative data. By supplementing the data from the longitudinal student database with qualitative research, the Research Subcommittee hoped that the college could gain a better understanding of students' goals and expectations, their transition to college, and their comfort with the institution. With this greater understanding, college faculty and staff could design and develop strategies to facilitate student transition to college, implement intervention techniques to improve retention, and create professional growth opportunities so that faculty and staff understand more fully the challenges students face.

Thus, the purpose of this research project was to explore the following questions for three groups of students, whites, blacks, and Hispanics, as they made the transition from school or work to college:

1. What were the goals and expectations of CLC students as they entered college?
2. What were students experiencing as they made the transition from school or work to college?

3. How did these students feel about their fit with CLC? Were they comfortable with the college environment?

The design of this project was influenced by a study conducted by Terenzini (1992) who explored student transition to college through focus group interviews with 132 students at four different types of higher education institutions, a community college, a liberal arts college, an urban university, and a residential research university. Discussion questions focused on five areas: pre-college information, expectations and reality, significant people/events, the transition, and general effects. Some of the 22 students in the focus groups conducted at the community college expressed feelings of self-doubt, but positive experiences in and outside of the classroom reinforced their self-esteem and perceptions of themselves as learners. Some black students, however, experienced feelings of unconnectedness and struggled to overcome perceptions that they were special admits. These students remained guarded when they were expected to defy negative stereotypes. Terenzini also reported that the community college students in this study became involved and excited about learning when they participated in class activities.

Tinto's (1975, 1986, 1987) model of student persistence emphasizes the importance of academic and social integration within the college community. He argued that students who were more involved and connected to their classes, fellow students, and campus were also more likely to persist. Similarly, those students who perceived that they did not fit in were more apt to leave the institution. Tinto described students who experienced feelings of incongruence as "individuals who perceive themselves as being substantially at odds with the institution" and referred to isolated students as those who were not involved in any part of the college (Tinto, 1987, pp. 53-54).

Feelings of incongruence or isolation can have a significant impact on first year students' adjustment to college life. While most students experience occasional feelings of loneliness and rejection during their college experience, these issues can be more significant for minority students.

Steele (1992) claims that black students have additional burdens when they begin their

first year of college. He believes that feelings of incongruence and isolation are more likely because blacks remain devalued in American schools and must continue to face and fight against negative black stereotypes related to their intellectual ability.

Allen (1996) studied black students at predominantly white postsecondary institutions and also concluded that isolation and alienation are serious problems for these students.

Hurtado, Carter, Spuler, Dale, and Pipken (1994) believe that similar negative forces face Hispanic students as they make their transition to college. Because the first year is most difficult, racial and ethnic tension can negatively affect Hispanic students' personal and social satisfaction with college. Hurtado et al. surveyed Hispanic students in four-year colleges in 1991 to learn more about the factors that affect their adjustment to college. While several factors influenced their persistence, the support of family and maintenance of social relationships were positively associated with academic adjustment. On the other hand, Hurtado et al. noted that these Hispanic students were more likely to feel like they did not fit in at colleges "where they perceive a climate that all minorities are special admits" (1994, p. 15). Hurtado et al. claimed that these types of negative stereotypes were difficult to dispel because they were less overt but still existed. A study by Nora and Rendon (1996) of 227 Hispanic students at three Texas community colleges provided different results: Neither perceptions of social integration nor academic integration affected their retention.

Malaney and Shively (1995) studied the academic and social experiences of minority students during their first year at a public university. Through interviews with 784 students during the fall and spring terms, they discovered that black and Hispanic students experienced high levels of discrimination and harassment and became disillusioned about their first year of college.

Nora and Cabrera (1996) examined the role of perceptions of prejudice on students' college achievement. This longitudinal study was completed at a predominantly white, commuter university. Survey results and college transcripts for 831 students were analyzed. Results indicated that "minority students were more likely to perceive a discriminatory campus

climate, sensed more prejudice on the part of faculty and staff, and were more prone to report negative in-class experiences than were whites" (1996, p. 130). Nora and Cabrera reported that these perceptions of prejudice did not have a negative impact on persistence. Their research suggested that the factors which most positively impacted academic success were encouragement from parents and positive interactions with faculty and academic staff.

These research studies confirm that black and Hispanic students are more likely to experience feelings of isolation and incongruence as they attempt to adjust to their first year of college. Racial tension can negatively affect their perceptions of themselves as learners. Positive experiences both within and outside of the classroom can enhance their self esteem, reinforce confidence in their academic abilities, and validate their knowledge and experiences.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study took place at the College of Lake County, a comprehensive community college located in the far northern suburbs of Chicago. The college's district, Lake County, is predominately white although the number of minorities has been steadily rising as presented in Table 1. According to the census, in 1980, the district was 87% white while in 1990, 83% of the population was white. Similarly, the college's student enrollment reflected the increase in minorities in the district. In fall semester, 1980, 88% of the students were white while in fall semester, 1990, 80% of the students were white. The increase in the number of minorities in the district and in the CLC student body is due primarily to growth in the number of Hispanics. In a typical semester, 15,000 students enroll at CLC, 82% are part-time, and the average age is slightly over 30.

Table 1

Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Lake County Population and CLC Enrollment, 1980 and 1990.

	Lake County Percent of Population		College of Lake County Percent of Enrollment	
	1980	1990	Fall, 1980	Fall, 1990
White non-Hispanic	87%	83%	88%	80%
Black non-Hispanic	6%	7%	7%	7%
Hispanic	5%	7%	4%	10%
Other	2%	3%	1%	3%

To conduct this study, students were invited to attend focus groups in the fall 1994 semester that were formed by race/ethnicity; that is, focus groups were specifically for blacks, for whites, and for Hispanics. Students from other minority races/ethnicities were not included in the study because of their small numbers. In the spring semester, 1995, the students who had participated in the fall semester focus groups were asked to attend focus groups again. The purpose of the spring semester focus groups was to discover if students' perceptions had changed after one semester of enrollment in college. Discussion guides for the fall and spring focus groups were developed in order to explore the research questions. All moderators and assistant moderators were members of the CLC faculty or staff and volunteered to participate in this project. The moderators matched the students as far as race/ethnicity; that is, the moderators for the white groups were white; for the black groups, black; and for the Hispanic groups, Hispanic. Upon entering the fall semester focus groups, the students were asked to take the first five minutes to complete a questionnaire which provided information about the students to augment data in the student database. Focus group sessions were audiotaped. Each semester after the focus groups had concluded, the Research Subcommittee met with the moderators and assistant moderators to conduct a "debriefing" of the focus groups.

Discussion Guides

During the fall and spring semester focus groups, students were asked questions based on the topics of the three research questions: goals and expectations, transition to college, and CLC

fit. The specific questions in the discussion guides explored the following areas: pre-college information, goals, expectations, support systems to help students stay in school, obstacles or barriers that the students perceived to impede progress, preparation for classes, factors affecting persistence/non-persistence, experiences within and outside the classroom, and comfort level with the college.

Data Analysis

The tapes for the fall and spring focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Two investigators listened to the tapes while following along with the transcribed text to verify accuracy. They then began to reduce the information included in these transcriptions by taking notes to summarize the responses and categorizing responses to each of the questions. Specific comments were highlighted when they represented common responses or patterns of specific focus groups.

The responses were classified by the race/ethnicity of the students. These responses were then put into a display through which the investigators could categorize the information, quantify the frequency of certain responses, and draw conclusions. As the conclusions were drawn, the researchers went back to the displays, summaries, and transcripts to verify the results.

It should be noted that this is a qualitative research study, and, therefore, the results may or may not reflect larger populations of similar students. However, this does not invalidate the important issues identified in the study. It merely means that these issues may occur with varying frequency in the larger population.

Student Sample

The sample for the study included first-time freshmen at CLC who initially enrolled in the fall semester, 1994. Students invited to the focus groups fit the following qualifications: new to CLC in the fall 1994 semester, no previous higher education degree, enrolled in at least one credit hour as of tenth day, and not enrolled in adult education classes (for example, ESL and GED classes). Among the students enrolled in fall 1994, 1,485 white students, 154 Hispanic students, and 137 black students fit the qualifications. All black and Hispanic students were

invited to attend the focus groups, and a random sample of 200 white students was invited to participate.

Fall Semester 1994 Focus Group Participants

A total of 71 students participated in the fall semester focus groups: 26 whites, 22 blacks, and 23 Hispanics. A majority of the students, 68%, were female. The highest percentage of females, 77%, participated in the black focus group, while 70% of the Hispanic students and 58% of the white students were female. The majority of participants were between the ages of 18 and 24. White and black students of all ages participated in the study; the Hispanic students, however, were all under 35 years old.

The survey that participants in the fall semester focus groups completed and the college's longitudinal student database provided information concerning the backgrounds, intent, and performance of students. Table 2 summarizes information regarding the educational attainment of students' parents. The percentage of students' mothers from all three focus groups who attended and graduated from college was fairly similar, with the mothers of Hispanic students most likely to have received a degree. The percentage of fathers who attended college differed dramatically: 65% of the white students' fathers had some college education, while only 20% of black students and 18% of Hispanic students reported their fathers had attended college. Degree attainment for fathers also differed significantly with 46% of the fathers of white students having graduated but only 15% and 14% of black and Hispanic fathers, respectively, attaining a degree.

Table 2

Educational Attainment of Parents

	Mother Attended College	Mother Graduated	Father Attended College	Father Graduated
White Students	46%	31%	65%	46%
Black Students	41%	24%	20%	15%
Hispanic Students	43%	35%	18%	14%
Total	44%	30%	37%	27%

Table 3 summarizes students' educational goals. Most of the students who participated in the fall semester focus groups planned to get a degree or certificate at the College of Lake County, and most planned to transfer to another college or university. Black students were most likely to plan on earning a degree or certificate at CLC, while white students were least likely to have this goal. White students, however, were most likely to plan on transferring, while black students were least likely to plan on attending another school. Hispanic students fell between these two groups, with a higher percentage planning to transfer than to get a degree or certificate at CLC.

Table 3

Educational Goals of Participating Students

	Intend to Earn Degree or Certificate	Intend to Transfer
White Students	68%	88%
Black Students	86%	64%
Hispanic Students	77%	82%
Total	77%	78%

The percent of students admitted to the college requiring remedial education differed greatly among the three groups: 8% of white students, 35% of the Hispanic students, and 45% of the black students were admitted needing remedial education.

Students among the three groups were equally likely to have met with an advisor or counselor during registration. However, the number of students attending CLC orientation differed greatly among the groups with 58% of white students and 57% of Hispanic students reporting having attended orientation but only 36% of black students.

Students were asked if they were employed and the number of hours they devoted to work and to studying each week. Table 4 presents this information for the three groups.

Table 4

Time Commitments of Participating Students

	Percent Employed	Average Hours Work/Week	Average Hours Study/Week
White Students	85%	25	9.8
Black Students	68%	33	10.3
Hispanic Students	70%	31	9.1
Total	75%	29	9.8

According to the data in Table 4, 75% of participants reported that they were working. The average number of hours worked per week was 29. The average number of hours spent studying per week was 9.8. The highest percentage of employed students was in the white focus groups with 85% of the students working, compared to 70% of Hispanic students and 68% of black students. However, white students averaged the fewest hours at work at 25, followed by Hispanics at 31 hours and black students at 33 hours. The average number of hours spent studying per week varied between 9.1 hours for Hispanic students and 10.3 hours for black students, with white students studying an average of 9.8 hours.

Black students participating in the focus groups did not do as well academically as their white and Hispanic counterparts after one semester of enrollment at CLC as presented in Table 5. Black students attempted and earned fewer credit hours and on average had a lower GPA than white and Hispanic students. Of the three groups, white students performed the best earning the highest average ratio of credit hours earned/attempted and GPA after one semester of enrollment. The performance of Hispanic students fell between the two other groups.

Table 5

Student Academic Performance, Fall Semester 1994

	Average Credit Hours Attempted	Average Credit Hours Earned	Ratio of Credit Hours Earned/ Attempted	Grade Point Average
White Students	11	10	.84	2.83
Black Students	9	6	.69	1.88
Hispanic Students	11	8	.74	1.98
Total	11	8	.76	2.30

Spring Semester 1995 Focus Group Participants

All fall semester focus group participants were invited to return for group discussions in the spring 1995 semester. Sessions were scheduled by students' race/ethnicity and by their enrollment status; that is, whether they were enrolled as of tenth day for spring semester. Thirty-two of the 71 participants in the fall semester 1994 focus groups returned to participate in the spring semester 1995 focus groups. Focus group participants included 28 persisters and four non-persisters. Of the persisters who attended the spring 1995 focus groups, 12 were white, 10 were black, and six were Hispanic. The majority of the persisters in the focus groups, 61%, were female. Eighty-six percent of the persisters were 18 to 24 years old, 11% were in the 25 to 34 year-old age group, and 4% were 35-44 years old. The non-persisters who participated in the focus groups included two male white students and two black students, one male and one female. Because of the small number of non-persisters who returned to participate in the focus groups, information about them and their comments are not included in this report.

Table 6 presents student academic performance information for persisters who participated in the spring semester focus groups.

Table 6

Student Academic Performance as of Spring 1995 of Persisters Who Participated in Spring Focus Groups

	Average Credit Hours Attempted	Average Credit Hours Earned	Ratio of Credit Hours Earned/Attempted	Grade Point Average
White Students	22	20	.90	2.80
Black Students	21	15	.72	1.56
Hispanic Students	28	24	.88	2.40
Total	23	19	.83	2.27

According to Table 6 by the end of the spring 1995 semester, black students continued to do not as well as white and Hispanic students, attempting and earning fewer credit hours and receiving lower grades on average. Hispanic students attempted and earned more credit hours than white students, but had a slightly lower ratio of credit hours earned/attempted and GPA.

RESULTS

The focus group discussions indicated that the transition from school or work to college is a challenging and complex process. Many experiences were common among the three groups. However, there were striking differences in the process by race/ethnicity. The perceptions of the students are described in this section, categorized according to the three research topics: goals and expectations, the transition to college, and CLC fit.

Goals and Expectations

All groups of students saw a direct connection between higher education and getting a job that would be interesting, improve their income, and provide opportunities for advancement. A Hispanic student explained, "Once I have a degree behind me, I know I can accomplish anything. Once I have something to back me up and push me forward, I can accomplish anything." The students also had altruistic motives for wanting to go to college. A black single mother explained:

I have a daughter, and I feel that I have to better myself to help her. I was sitting around

not doing anything and feeling depressed . . . so I made my mind up and went to school, and I feel better about myself knowing that I have to look forward to making it ... for my daughter.

Black and Hispanic students more frequently mentioned that they wanted to set an example for others and also said college would give them a chance to be the first in their family to go to college and to be someone. Some black students also explained that they wanted to succeed in college to dispel negative racial stereotypes. Some of the Hispanic students explained that they were coming to college so that they could obtain a rewarding job helping people.

The students chose the College of Lake County for several reasons. They cited the less expensive tuition and the convenient location. Some students in all groups said that family ties prevented them from going away to school. Others enrolled at CLC because of a specific program, and some students in all groups mentioned the college's excellent reputation. A Hispanic student explained, "To go to a community college for your first two years is a smart thing because you spend so much money going to a university." This student believed that the quality of education at a community college was equal to that of a university.

Some students in each group viewed CLC as a stepping-stone to getting the basic first two years and moving on, as a Hispanic male said, "It is ... better to go to a community college before a university so you can get used to the homework and get down the fundamentals." Others admitted that their high school academic record was weak and they needed to improve their basic skills. A Hispanic female explained, "I didn't do good in high school, and I was always slacking off. I want to learn how to learn again."

The educational goals of the students varied by race/ethnicity. The most common goals among the white students were to complete their general education courses, earn an associate degree, and transfer. Several white students mentioned B.A., M.A., Ph.D., or professional degrees as their goals. The great majority of Hispanic students stated their goal as getting an associate degree while many said they wanted to earn a masters degree. Black students' goals were somewhat different, being more limited than those of white and Hispanic students. Two

said they came to CLC for one or a few courses, while the majority wanted either a certificate or an associate degree. Only three mentioned a B.A., and one person said she wanted to be a lawyer.

In the spring semester focus groups, when asked how their career and educational goals had changed from fall to spring, the students shared common experiences. Some students within each group remained committed to the goals they set during their first semester. Others within each group had changed majors or remained undecided.

All three groups of returning students remained convinced that higher education was the key to greater opportunities. They believed that a college education would provide them with better jobs, financial rewards, and more opportunities for satisfying work. Some black students saw college as not only a way to get ahead but also a chance to defy negative stereotypes of "black people who aren't smart and can't get jobs where they can use their brain."

Perceptions about what to expect from college varied among the focus group participants. While students in each group admitted they were scared that they would not fit in, others said that they did not know what to expect. White students thought the class size would be larger than it was and teachers would be unwilling to help them. One student described the situation as follows:

> When I visited some four-year institutions and sat in on lectures, you're like a number. You wouldn't know all those people in there because there is like four hundred people in the lecture, and the teacher wouldn't even know your name. It is different here.... You walk down the hallway, and you know who your teacher is, and they say "hi".

In the fall semester, white and Hispanic students said college was easier than they expected, "like high school without the rules." When asked what they expected and what they found, two white students described CLC as follows:

> I think it is easier than I thought it would be. I'm very glad that I came here rather than going away. I know I would have been home already if I had gone away. I know that this is a better atmosphere to learn because the classes are smaller. I know that I

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have to come here, and I spend more time here. I come a couple of hours before class, and I go in the library. I know I wouldn't do that if I was away at school. I think that this year is a building block for me, ... and I'll learn to create good study habits, and when I go away, I won't just throw them out the window.

I expected big rooms with 400 people in them trying to learn something, and I'm very impressed with the way it is. It is a lot like high school. The best part about it is the fact that I am more comfortable, and they even have the lists that you can write everyone's phone number on. So, even though you don't know everyone in the class, at least you can call someone up, and they are more than willing to help. I've used that plenty of times when I've missed a class. Another thing I really enjoy about it is the fact that the older people in my class, especially in my history class, is like having seven or eight other teachers in there because they have been here, and they can put their viewpoints in there, too. I've never experienced that before, and I thought that it was great.

However, by spring semester, many of the students who had found college easy had changed their minds. Students reported studying harder than they did initially. The students who attended CLC immediately after high school graduation reported in the spring semester that college was more difficult than expected, "Since I was fresh out of high school, I really didn't know how tough it actually would be, to go from high school to college. I was expecting it to be simple and easy, but even though it is a community college, it is not easy at all." This student described making "a complete attitude change." The Hispanic students concluded that the keys to success at CLC were finding the time to study, going to class all the time, doing homework, not trying to cram everything in at the last minute, and "actually opening the book."

From initial enrollment, the perspective of the majority of black students differed. They explained that college was much harder than they had expected:

I made real good grades in high school. I didn't have to study, but here I have to put much more time into studying.... It is like everything is basically on your own....

> You decide for yourself if you are going to make a good grade or pass the class or not.... In high school, the teachers ... are constantly reminding you that this is due, but here everything is on your own.
>
> In high school, you can goof off and ... still pass, and here you've got to study. In high school, you had study hall periods, you had to go - that was like a class, but here it is like you have to do your own study hall.

The Transition to College

Although the transition to college can be challenging, it can be eased by support systems of family, friends, and colleagues. The students were questioned about the people influencing them to go to college and about their support systems. All groups identified family members as significantly influencing their college enrollment. Although some of the students' parents did not attend college, they wanted their children to have the chance. Hispanic students, particularly, mentioned their parents as major influences on their decision to go to college, stating that their parents wanted things better for their children so that they would not have to go through what the parents had gone through. A Hispanic male explained:

> My father grew up in New York and saw me start doing the same things he had been doing. [I was] running around on the streets and started graffiti writing when I was 10 and getting into trouble. My father said, "You could take your talent and go to school and get an art degree and put that on surfaces that other people can look at and that won't get you into trouble." I started thinking about that and that is why I came here. I can use the techniques I learn at school and the ones I learned on the street for my art.

Friends, high school teachers and counselors, and supervisors and co-workers in the workplace also advised these students to attend college.

In all groups, students described how important it was for them to succeed because they were the first ones in their families to go to college. A student said succinctly, "My parents see me as their future." A Hispanic female's response focused on other family issues:

> It is really important because I see my mom and her sister the way they are. My mom's

> sister is dependent on her parents, and I don't want to be dependent on my parents. When I get out of college, I don't want to have to move back in. Once I'm out I want to stay out and make good on my own.

Black students agreed that succeeding in college was important to them personally but their reasons took a different twist. They were committed to setting an example to their family and their race and serving as a role model. One black female explained:

> It is important to me because I have sisters following behind me, . . . and I want them to think they can't settle for any job when they can keep moving up. It is important to me because there are not a lot of black nurses, a lot of black doctors, a lot of black lawyers. I don't want them to settle for just anything.

In the spring semester focus groups, the importance of the support of parents, family, and friends was confirmed. All Hispanic students stated that they had support. One white student noted that during the first semester he was enrolled he had a lot of support. However, by the second semester, he had begun to see stress in his family because "I'm gone a lot, or when I'm not gone I'm doing homework." His family asks, "When are you going to fix this and that?" Two black students explained that they had little support from their family, and they realized that they must depend on themselves to reach their academic goals. One described the situation, "My family didn't understand why I wanted to go to school" instead of getting a job in a factory where most of the student's family works.

Students in all groups emphasized the importance to themselves in succeeding at CLC. One white male explained, "It is very important because all through my life anything I have ever started, come hell or high water, I will finish it. So there is no question that it is very important."

The kinds of adjustments the students discussed were typical of many first year students. For example, they needed to limit time socializing, change work schedules, devote more time to studying, and sleep less. Black students talked more than the other groups about cutting back their hours at work, but as one student stated, "I don't mind it much when I look at the big picture and see where I am going to go. It's a small price I have to pay."

Finances were an obstacle mentioned by all groups. Family and work responsibilities also played a significant role in impeding students' progress towards achieving their goals. While academic obstacles facing white and Hispanic students were more closely related to selecting and scheduling courses, several black students mentioned how challenging it was to manage their time, to balance multiple priorities, and to "get willpower ... to stay focused on school." The most common obstacle mentioned by black students was their lack of preparation for the academic rigor of college. Several black students complained that the teachers taught too fast, and they had a difficult time keeping up. A black student reflected the experience of others in her focus group when she explained how she tried unsuccessfully to overcome this problem:

> We are on this chapter today, tomorrow we are on chapter seven, and we are only on chapter one today.... I tried to pair up with a little study group. Maybe we can learn this together since they go too fast, but then I work so it is kind of hard to do that, you know, study, then work, and then have time for my other classes.

The majority of white and Hispanic students felt prepared for classes and had their books and syllabi when classes started. However, black students in one of the focus groups had a different experience. They said they were not prepared for classes, did not have their textbooks, and did not understand about faculty office hours.

Black students also related several incidents about problems they encountered including confusion about registration, financial aid, secondary school reference forms, prerequisites, and grade reports. They also mentioned rude employees, lack of availability of tutoring, and little information on student activities.

Students identified their instructors as their most common resource of information and help. White and black students appeared to be more comfortable approaching their teachers for help and contacting them outside of class. Several Hispanic students, however, felt more comfortable seeking help from their friends or other students, and a few said they never contacted their instructors outside of class. Some white and Hispanic students said that they would go to a counselor for help. Several of the black students identified a student recruitment

specialist as another person they would go to for help. Students also mentioned asking classmates for help. Some white and Hispanic students would go back to their high school teachers and counselors.

The important role of faculty in helping students make the transition to college was reinforced by each focus group. Students appreciated friendly, helpful, and caring faculty, especially teachers who learned their names quickly. Students said that receiving the names and telephone numbers of fellow students in the first few days of class made them feel included. Some students talked about participating in campus activities; one student mentioned the importance of her teacher in helping her find out about activities, "Everyday, my English teacher would give us a list of all the activities that we could go to and told us where they were.... She emphasized that it was free because you were a student. I thought that was really nice."

In spring semester, the returning students confirmed that faculty play a critical role in easing students' transition to college. All groups frequently identified faculty as the best part of their classroom experience. They praised teachers who were patient, organized, open, motivated, and willing to work with students to make the class enjoyable. One student described the best classroom experience as "when the teacher puts himself/herself into the class and actually works for you or with you." They enjoyed class discussions, making class presentations, and working in small groups. Students in all groups also appreciated the opportunity to meet new people in classes. Hispanic students focused more on opportunities for meeting people and having friends in class. Black students mentioned their growing confidence in giving speeches, expressing themselves, learning more as a student, and learning from other students.

The most frustrating classroom experiences were also related to faculty. Students described some faculty as aloof, boring, confusing, not interested in students, covering material too quickly, and "just there going along to get the paycheck."

Students across all three groups had similar answers about what made the transition more difficult. They mentioned going part-time and students leaving right after classes. One white female explained, "The only difference that catches my eye is that it is not a four-year college ...

and most students don't hang out and stay after class." Some younger students felt uncomfortable in classes where other students were older. Likewise, older students in classes where the majority of students were younger reported feeling out of place.

When asked about what was needed to make CLC work for them, comments varied. Requests included increasing the number of classes at the Lakeshore Campus and extra-curricular activities. Some students wanted changes in the scheduling of classes, for example, longer classes on one day, shorter classes on more days, more classes on Saturday, and more evening computer classes. Other requests were more related to student services support, for example, better information on financial aid, more scholarships, someone to turn to with problems, more tutors, child care at the Lakeshore Campus, better signs, and improved customer service from staff. White students in one of the focus groups looked to themselves as the resource to make CLC work, explaining, "Look to the future. It's up to you, not the teacher. If you want the grade, you'll get the grade. It's up to the individual. It's a matter of will."

The students in the focus groups believed that they had learned what it takes to be successful in college. They talked about studying more and remaining motivated. The great majority would recommend CLC to a friend and cited the excellent faculty, small classes, convenient location, and affordability of classes. A Hispanic student said she would recommend the college to friends because "I think a lot of people aren't ready to go away, and this gives you two years to finish growing up, and then you can go away and be more responsible.... It is a good foundation ... as a base for the rest of your adult life."

CLC Fit

In the focus groups, students were asked if they felt their race/ethnicity affected their experience at CLC and about their comfort level with the college. All three groups explained that campus diversity and being accepted for who they are made them feel comfortable at CLC. A white student explained, "There are so many different people, different kinds of people, different races, different backgrounds, different jobs, and here for different reasons that ... everybody is accepted."

The comments of students reinforced the positive impact of diversity and the opportunities to meet other students from different backgrounds and races both in and outside the classroom. They described these experiences as fascinating and enriching. A white student noted, "It is so diverse here. I think it's great." Another said:

> You have different people coming from different backgrounds even though they may be from the same ethnic background, they come from completely different places in life and that brings more to it. In the business class I was in last semester, it added a lot because everyone threw their two cents worth into the pot, and it gives you a bigger picture besides just what one teacher can tell you.

Meeting people was the most positive experience in and outside of the classroom for all groups. Opportunities to see high school friends and meeting different people on campus increased the students' sense of belonging to the campus community. However, both blacks and Hispanics were uncomfortable in classes where they were the only minority although most explained that they were feeling more comfortable as they adjusted. Students stated that they would be more at ease if there were more minority students in their classes. A Hispanic student explained:

> The only time I would feel uncomfortable is when they all turn and look at me at the same time. I don't know why they do it, but they do. Then they talk and out of the corner of my eye I look at them, and I know they are talking about me.... I think it's because I'm Hispanic.

While students perceived diversity to be positive, their personal experiences in relationship to their race/ethnicity differed by group. Almost all white students said that their race did not affect their experience and that group discussions in class helped them better understand races and different perspectives. One white female proudly explained that she liked having her first black instructor at CLC, "I had my first black teacher, and I really liked him. I've never had a black teacher and never see them in that position."

Hispanics were split on how race/ethnicity affected their experience. Some thought

teachers treated all students the same, but one complained about service in financial aid, and another complained about a counselor who tried to persuade her to take an easier program. Two Hispanic students disliked stereotypical treatment from their peers, but, fortunately, these students turned this situation around. A Hispanic female explained:

> When I first started in class when I was walking in, they said "All those Hispanics are stupid and all are in gangs. All they do is drink."... Automatically, they all thought bad of me. By the end of the class I had my good points.... They finally respected me.

Other Hispanic students disagreed and explained that they were treated well:

> I felt better when I came to CLC because I don't look at people as a color. When you are in the outside world, people look at you and judge you. Here at CLC, it doesn't matter if you are young, old, what color and that is what the great part about it is.

Black students also made positive comments about the friendly teachers and staff and the equal treatment they received. Others said they felt uncomfortable at first but felt things improved, especially when classes were integrated and diverse. Students' perspectives depended somewhat on their previous experience as demonstrated by the following comments by two black females:

> I am from North Chicago, and like basically it is all black, and around here in my classes, I felt uncomfortable.... [But, students at CLC] are friendly and cool, ... so I feel better now, but I was first uncomfortable.

> Coming from Mundelein, there aren't too many black people out there....I was the only black girl that graduated from my class..... And, then when I came here and saw how many black people were here, it was shocking.

Other black students believed that race/ethnicity affected their experience. They felt uncomfortable as the only blacks in their classes. They sensed that white students wanted to know why the black students were there. One black student said his classmates, "ask me questions like I am from another planet.... You know I mean some of the questions can be off the wall ... like have you been in jail, you know questions like that." They disliked it when

teachers turned to them to represent black opinion in classroom discussions. One black female tried to explain how she felt as the only black in class:

> Some of them don't let their true feelings come out when they have a black person in the room.... They are just so blunt that it gets you a little bit.... They think it's all right even though they might say a little comment, to them, it's funny, but, you know, it is offensive to me and they put it off like it's no big thing.... I think in that way race does start to play a role in the classroom.... You can't help but wonder what somebody is thinking or what somebody is going to say, and you feel like you have to have your guard up and prepare for whatever comes your way.

Black students were bothered by classroom issues related to race and were cautious and sensitive to negative comments and stereotypes. One student summed up his feelings as follows:

> There are a lot of white people that grew up in white neighborhoods that didn't really associate with black people so they are very cautious of how they deal with me because the only black people they see are on the movie screen and TV, and they see them as being violent, ... they can't be intelligent, can't say a straight sentence, so they are kind of cautious as to how they look at me and how they talk to me, but when they get to know me, ... they tend to be at ease.

Classes, textbooks, and films which included negative stereotypes of blacks, for example, welfare mothers, slavery, and southern blacks with different dialects made the students feel uncomfortable. A male student concluded, "as long you are going to be a minority, it is going to be different."

Two black students had a different perspective, seeing classroom discussion as a teaching opportunity. One explained, "It has given me a chance to tell other people my experiences and the things I go through. It helps them out as much as it helps me."

Black students gave suggestions as to how the college could improve their experience. They recommended showing more positive images of blacks in the classroom and more photos of blacks in publications and offering more activities of interest to blacks.

SUMMARY and IMPLICATIONS

To draw implications from these results, it is important to return to the initial impetus for this study: Steele's belief that colleges must focus on developing black students' intellectual potential and that teachers must learn to value the student for "his or her potential and as a person" (Steele, 1992, p. 78). Steele's recommendations have particular relevance as the results of this research are reviewed and implications are suggested. While first-time freshmen at the College of Lake County shared many of the same experiences, their transition to college differed in several aspects by race/ethnicity. The findings from this study provide a wealth of information to the college as it strives to improve the academic success of all students. Successful transition and persistence in college learning are enabled by a range of activities and attitudes undertaken by the entire college community.

It has been suggested that the process for transitioning students to college should begin well before students even apply to college (Attinasi, 1989). Thus, students' expectations when they enroll in college may come closer to the reality. While white students in the focus groups anticipated a university-like environment with large lecture halls and aloof teachers, black students found the enrollment process to be confusing and the classes to be more difficult than they had anticipated. Experience with their local community college long before enrolling may have helped the students with the transition process. Attinasi suggests that opportunities should be made available for junior high students and their parents to become familiar with the college. He also recommends using college tours and orientations as a means for socializing pre-college students to the institution.

Confusion about the enrollment process and the varying goals of students in the focus groups point to the need for mandatory academic advising, especially for first-time freshmen and first-generation students. While students in all the focus groups believed a college education was their means to greater career opportunities including rewarding and well-paying jobs, their educational goals differed by race/ethnicity. White students had the most ambitious academic goals which included transferring and eventually completing graduate and professional degrees.

Hispanic students spoke of masters degrees while black students limited themselves to striving for certificates and associate degrees. Mandatory advisement will help students understand the educational opportunities available to them and familiarize them with the processes for taking advantage of these opportunities. The recommendation for mandatory advisement is strongly supported in the literature. Nora and Rendon state, "The implication is that community colleges need to do more in the way of providing assistance and information to help students develop clear, realistic educational goals at an early enrollment point" and "Students need early counseling and advisement about setting realistic educational and career goals, getting serious and committed to studying, selecting proper course sequences, and acquiring materials and information about transferring to senior institutions" (1996, p. 276).

The perceptions expressed by students reinforced the importance of helping the college faculty and staff understand the varying nature of the transition process. College staff who interact with students must be aware of the different issues students bring to college and use that to improve support to students. Customer service can be enhanced by helping staff understand the complex issues some students bring to college, for example, their lack of understanding about some of the processes of application, assessment, advising, counseling, financial aid, registration, textbooks, syllabi, and faculty hours.

Orientation is key in helping students learn about their new environment. During the debriefing sessions after the focus groups were held, the Research Subcommittee came to the conclusion that more intensive orientation sessions over a longer period of time should be held for first-time college students. The orientation program should provide both academic orientation as well as opportunities to help students feel validated. Students should be helped to understand what it takes to be successful in college and the adjustments they may need to make to stay in college. For example, in making the transition to college, participants from all focus groups limited time spent socializing, changed their work schedules, and devoted more time to studying. Black students, in particular, talked about cutting back their hours at work. The college should consider varying the orientation program for students of different backgrounds

and experiences. Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1995) argue that first generation students are high risk and need special attention, intrusive advising, and increased study time. The researchers also recommend that faculty members be involved in new student orientations. Their recommendations for offering new student orientations are consistent with Gose (1995), Hurtado et al. (1994), Malaney and Shively (1995), Roueche and Roueche (1994), and Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994).

Students' perceptions and experiences reinforced the positive impact faculty have on student learning. Once the students are in the classes, faculty play a critical role. Rendon (1994) urges faculty to motivate students to believe in their inherent capacity to be excited about learning and to feel valued as people. She recommends that faculty establish a positive classroom experience by using collaboration and drawing on students' experiences and knowledge. All groups of students in the focus groups benefited from meeting students from diverse cultures and having opportunities to share their knowledge and experiences in small group discussions in the classroom. This kind of intergroup dialogue helps promote understanding and acceptance.

While black students praised their teachers, they also explained the difficulty they had in learning how to study, manage their time, and master course material. Their perceptions were supported by their weaker academic records. The performance of Hispanic students in these focus groups was also weaker than that of white students. As the college tries to move forward to challenge students academically, many support systems will need to be highly visible and utilized to improve their academic achievement. However, Steele cautions that the focus of these systems should be on challenging the students and facilitating their self-fulfillment rather than on remediation or membership in minority support programs (1992, 1995).

Activities outside of the classroom are also important for students as they make the transition to college. Students in all groups confirmed that providing places and opportunities for students to meet old and new friends helps them feel involved. The role of student involvement in campus activities in promoting that acceptance was also reinforced by some

students.

Students' perceptions of their fit with the CLC environment depended on their race/ethnicity as well as their backgrounds. All three focus groups explained that campus diversity had a positive impact on their college experience. Students appreciated being accepted for who they are, and they enjoyed meeting students from other backgrounds in and out of class. White students said that their race did not affect their experience and that group discussions in class helped them better understand other races. However, black and Hispanic students often felt isolated especially when they were the only minorities in their classes. Black and Hispanic students were sensitive to negative stereotypes, experienced discomfort in their classes when issues of racism were discussed, and felt more comfortable with students of similar backgrounds. The college can follow the suggestions of Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (1996) and Rendon (1994) who recommend that the college promote cultural awareness workshops and programs for students and staff. The introduction and discussion of various cultures, including those of blacks and Hispanics needs to be done carefully, with sensitivity and compassion. In the debriefing sessions, the Research Subcommittee recommended that both faculty and students receive on-going training to learn how to handle discussions about race/ethnicity. In addition, the college needs to clarify that it will not tolerate bias, racism, and discrimination in classes, outside of class, nor in offices and departments. CLC's commitment to affirmative action must continue. Hiring faculty and staff of color will benefit all students as these employees serve as teachers, role models and mentors within the academic arena.

These tasks will certainly challenge College of Lake County to renew its commitment to access and quality. As the college reaches to meet this challenge, it will be able to serve the underrepresented students in higher education more effectively. The college community, especially the students, will ultimately benefit.

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